*Languages and Cultures in Research and Education*
*pp. 227–237*

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## Irony as a Metapragmatic Problem*

Irony is a highly complex phenomenon with varied forms of manifestation, occurring naturally in the most diverse scenes of communication. It is employed in everyday conversation just as much as in literary discourse, be it popular fiction or a more elevated form of literature. Public speakers are keen to exploit its convincing power, as are newspaper columnists intent on bringing their readers to 'read between the lines'. In scientific discourse, it is especially prevalent in genres profiling a critical attitude (reviews, disputes), although in a subtle or covert way it also frequently appears elsewhere.

In general, linguistic irony makes available to the speaker, and invites the reader to recognize, a form of context-dependent implicit evaluation. By adopting an ironic stance, speakers express their self-reflective detachment from the representation brought under the scope of irony, questioning the appropriateness of its inherent vantage point, and implicitly offering a different one from which the situation in focus can be better assessed.

(1) Having been thrown out of Cambridge for improper tie wear and engagement in immoral affairs, I enrolled to University College London.

In the literary excerpt in (1), which is the first sentence in Antal Szerb's short story *Cynthia*, the speaker casts doubt on the appropriateness of rules that treat improper tie wear and engagement in immoral affairs as equally serious types of offence. However, as the quote comes from the fictitious narrator of a short story, irony may also be directed at the narrator himself. This reading is suggested by the

* This paper was supported by grant k 76878 of OTKA (Hungarian Scientific Research Fund).

possibility that the author, counting on shared background knowledge, uses the passage to undermine the narrator's credibility, at least as far as the role of improper tie wear is concerned (cf. Tátrai 2007, 2008).

The paper is structured as follows. First, I will briefly review the historical background behind the interpretation of irony I have suggested above (**1**), taking both rhetorical and philosophical traditions into account (**1.1**), in turn brought to bear on the dilemmas faced by pragmatic theory (**1.2**). In **2**, this will be followed by the delineation of an interpretive framework (characterized by a functional cognitive theoretical orientation) which takes perspectivization to be the crucial property of irony, and treats the latter as a metapragmatic phenomenon stemming from the speaker's critical, self-reflective attitude to his/her own language use.

## 1. Historical background

### 1.1. Rhetorical and philosophical traditions

With respect to irony, the commonplace that there is nothing new under the sun is well worth reiterating. As it turns out, most of the key notions offered by contemporary pragmatic theory (pretence, attitude, contrast, etc.) were already applied to irony in Antiquity.

The original meaning of the Greek word ειρωνεία is 'pretence', especially the 'pretence of being ignorant'. This formed the basis of the *eirôn* figure that, along with its opponent the *alazôn*, was a stock character of 5th century BC Greek comedy. The basic schema underlying the comedies concerned was that the *eirôn*, a man of lower stature and social status used his cunning wit (the pretence of being ignorant) to bring down the *alazôn*, a vain but stupid character boastful of his magnificence (cf. Veres 1977). This interpretation was not only popularized in comedies, but also lived on in Aristotle's work when he contrasted irony with boastfulness (cf. Aristotle 1997), defining the former as the pretence of having less, and the latter as the pretence of having more than one actually possesses. The close link between irony and comedy (or ridicule) was further reinforced by the rhetorical tradition, as the subtle wit of irony was first contrasted with buffoonery (*bomolochy*), then discussed among the various modes and degrees of ridiculousness (cf. Szabó/Szörényi 1997: 140–144).

Socrate marked an important change in the interpretive history of irony. He considered it not so much as a device to be used to comic effect, but rather as a rhetorical procedure subservient to discovering the truth. As Plato's dialogues amply illustrate, the key to his irony is that the speaker discredits or refutes the listener's position precisely by pretending to agree with it. Therefore, Socrate's irony partly relies on earlier interpretations of irony that defined it as the pretence of being ignorant. There is also a crucial difference, however, which has a profound impact on the value system attached to the phenomenon. Socrate's irony is not meant to

deceive the discourse partner; on the contrary, it serves their joint effort to discover the truth. The destabilization of an evaluative vantage point is the first step toward replacing it with a more adequate one, to be adopted both by the listener within the dialogue, and by the reader comprehending the dialogue "from without". A further important point is that Socrate's irony is more than a rhetorical technique. In a broader, philosophical sense, this kind of ironic attitude represents a particular outlook on life (*ironia vitae*), characteristic of certain people's approach to the things and events of the world (cf. Veres 1977, Behler 1998, Oesterreich 2001).

The authors of Latin rhetorical books (Cicero, Quintilian, Cornificius) were aware of the significance of Socrate's interpretation of irony, and as a result, treated irony as a manifestation of wit rather than as a comic device. In their view, however, irony was not so much a method or operation for exposing inadequacies but rather a rhetorical device (*ironia verbi*) to be listed among the tropes (cf. Lausberg 1960: 302–303, 446–450; Oesterreich 2001; Tátrai 2008). Quintilianus (2008: 582–584) and subsequent interpretations defined irony as a figure of immutation allowing the speaker to mean the opposite of what he says (when appropriate contextual clues are in place): dispraise something while pretending to praise it, or (less frequently) the other way round. Hence, irony could now stand in contrast with metaphor: it was argued that while replacement was based on similarity in the latter's case, irony relied on opposites, which was now seen as the shared category-defining feature uniting various types of irony (cf. Komlósi 2008: 96–101). Following Quintilian (2008: 558), Cornificius (2001: 107–108) discussed irony as a particular form of allegorical speech, which used opposites rather than similarities to the effect that the public speaker could mean something different from what he literally said. This interpretation (based on opposites and contrast) came to be predominant in the rhetorical (and more recently, stylistic) treatments of irony in later centuries.

In addition to rhetorical and stylistic interpretations, irony has also been addressed from philosophical and literary theoretic perspectives, which focus on irony as a philosophico-aesthetic category. As has been suggested above, Socrate had an important role in opening the way for the philosophical interpretation of irony, leading to a view of ironic attitude as an ideal outlook on life in Renaissance Humanism. It was not until Romanticism, however, that irony came to the forefront of attention in aesthetic philosophy. Romantic authors breaking away from the rhetorical tradition (Schelling, Schlegel, Solger) went as far as regarding irony as a universal paradigm (*ironia entis*). According to Schlegel, irony is infinite, as it lies in the constant alertness and awareness of infinite chaos, which demands a continuous shifting between opposite viewpoints. This calls for a visionary form of art that is continuously creating and destructing itself. While Schlegel places irony between the comic and the tragic, irony necessarily involves an experience of the tragic in Hegel's objective dialectics. By contrast, Kierkegaard argues that it is precisely irony that precludes the tragic by replacing it (cf. Veres 1997, Behler 1998, Oesterreich 2001).

In modern times, irony is regarded not so much as a universal principle or outlook on life but as a particular (but easily generalizable) manner of speaking, which exploits the context's role in inducing semantic shifts (cf. e.g. Bahtyn and Brooks). Postmodern approaches inspired by Nietzsche are closely related to the romanticist conception of irony. For example, deconstructionists also reject the binary model inherent in the interpretation of irony in the rhetorical tradition (cf. e.g. de Man 1996, Rorty 1994). They regard irony as an infinite shifting or turning of meanings, eliminating the fixed opposition between what is said and what is meant; furthermore, they also question the fixation or indeed the fixability of evaluative vantage points. Finally, Umberto Eco's (1994) explanation (of a hermeneutic orientation) links irony to a feeling of *déjà vu* (as every utterance seems to be a quote of something already played out), and regards the ironic attitude to the functioning of language as a distinctive property of postmodernism.

## 1.2. The dilemmas faced by pragmatic theory

Although irony has always been a key concern of rhetorical and stylistic studies, research on the phenomenon took a new dimension as a pragmatic perspective was increasingly adopted. Within linguistic pragmatics, irony has received relatively little attention in the Austinian tradition, whose chief concern has been with the issues of speech acts (but see Hartung 2002). By contrast, the followers of Grice have assigned it a central status, and treated it as a particular form of implicit meaning construal serving the strategic avoidance of explicitness (cf. Gibbs / Colston ed. 2007).

Under the assumptions of Grice's (1975) theory of interaction, the implied meaning associated with irony is analysed in terms of a conversational implicature based on the delibarate violation of the maxim of quality ('Do not say what you believe to be false'). His example is the following:

(2) X is a fine friend.

The assertion in (2) is made by the speaker after X, in whom he had full confidence before, discloses one of his business secrets to a rival company. According to the explanation, irony manifests itself when it is completely clear to the discourse partners that the speaker has said something that he does not believe in (with the listener knowing that the speaker knows that he knows this). This leads the listener to the hypothesis that the speaker must have meant something different from what he literally said, which happens to be nothing but its opposite. This interpretation of irony has close ties with traditional analyses based on meaning reversal, and further resembles classical rhetorical explanations in deducing irony from a contrast between literal and non-literal (figurative) meaning.

Subsequent pragmatic interpretations rely heavily on Grice's approach, and continue to work with a two-step model to account for the processing and comprehension of irony. They do so despite significantly reinterpreting both the relationship between literal and figurative meaning, and the nature of meaning reversal. In

Attardo's (2000a, b) two-step model, the processing of irony involves the following procedures. First, the listener comprehends the primary meaning of what the speaker has said; however, he/she also notices that it is contextually inadequate (in part or in full). This invites him/her to take a second step and search for an alternative interpretation that is maximally relevant in the context at hand until he/she arrives at an ironic reading. In Giora's (1998, 1999, 2003) model, the point of departure is the most salient meaning (rather than the literal one), which is the most easily accessible, and shows the highest degree of routinization and conventionality; irony results from it by indirect negation. (For an in-depth discussion of these two-step models, see Komlósi 2008.)

More radical departures from Grice's classical explanation highlight the idea that information is processed simultaneously from both the linguistic representation and its discourse context during the comprehension of irony (cf. Gibbs 1994, Colston 2000, Colston / Gibbs 2007: 1–7).

Working in a cognitive pragmatic framework, Sperber / Wilson (1981, 1990, 1992, 2004) break away from explanations assuming semantic reversal and a binary opposition between literal and non-literal meaning, and introduce a model of irony whose affinities lie with romanticist and postmodern (rather than classical rhetoric) treatments. In their view, irony is a kind of evaluative attitude (communicated implicitly rather than explicitly), which is associated with what they call an "echoic mention". For them, echo has a broader sense than quoting, as it includes any re-mentioning of thoughts, opinions, etc. as well as concrete utterances. They can be either real or imagined, and may be attributed to either a particular person or (in the form of norms and expectations) to an entire community.

(3) Now that's what I call a tidy room.

The ironic utterance in (3), the likes of which parents often resort to on entering their child's room, directs criticism at the addressee, the source of irony being a general social norm violated by the situation in question.

On the account offered by Sperber and Wilson, the ironic interpretation of an utterance (or its part) comes from the recognition that an echoed representation is inappropriate under the current circumstances of communication, as it is at odds with the state of affairs which it is meant to represent. The listener therefore performs inferences to arrive at an interpretation that best satisfies the discourse partners' communicative demands (the fundamental assumption being that every utterance conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance). Hence, this model eliminates the two-step solution, only requiring the assumption that the unit to be understood ironically is an echoic mention. Concomitantly, it is also able to motivate why ironic interpretations are sometimes easier to access and more straightforward than 'serious' ones. For example, it can account for the conventionalized ironic use of expressions such as *icing on the cake*, *edifying sight* etc. Furthermore, the model also questions the strict dichotomy between literal and non-literal meanings, or

more specifically non-ironic and ironic interpretations. As a result, it can explain why there are various kinds of ironic attitude (and consequently various levels of irony) ranging from the hardly noticeable to the highly offensive, with transitional cases in between. Sperber and Wilson illustrate this point by the following example, taken from Mark Anthony's speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*:

(4) Brutus is an honourable man.

The statement in (4) occurs four times in Mark Anthony's speech. However, each time there is a slightly different attitude attached to the representation, which may be regarded as the echo of public opinion. In the first case it marks a conciliatory attitude, then it becomes increasingly disdainful to the point of being outright sarcastic on its fourth appearance.

## 2. Irony, perspectivization, and metapragmatic reflection

### 2.1. Irony as perspectivization

In what follows, I set out to outline a possible interpretation of irony that draws on Sperber and Wilson's model, taking over and reinterpreting its key tenets in a functional cognitive pragmatic framework (cf. e.g. Verschueren 1999, Tomasello 1999).

My point of departure is that irony is amenable to a description in terms of the organization of perspective (cf. Kotthoff 2002). During the production and comprehension of utterances, a key role is played by the position (perspective) from which the speaker views the elements of the discourse universe. This means that the study of perspective needs to take the following two components into account, which mutually presuppose each other: 1) the vantage point, i.e. the viewpoint from which something is represented, 2) orientation, i.e. the resulting specific representation of objects once a particular vantage point is taken (Sanders / Spooren 1997: 86, cf. Langacker 1987). The viewpoints utilized in the utterance are to be interpreted with respect to the referential centre defined by the speaker's person and his/her position in space and time.

In addition to the referential centre, a further important context-dependent vantage point is the subject of consciousness, which is also central to the functioning of irony. It is associated with the person to whom active consciousness (perception, volition, thought or speech) is attributed regarding the information conveyed. The notion of subject of consciousness highlights the subject-bound nature of linguistic cognition, cf. Brunner's (1986: 26) related term of "subjunctivizing reality". Any experience about the world is necessarily filtered through the speaker's mind before she can share it with others. Hence, it is the speaker herself who acts as the subject of consciousness by default, assuming responsibility for the message even in the absence of explicit markers of this. However, since the speaker regards not only herself but also others as mental agents (i.e., she can identify with others), she is

able to evoke their mental states or even their participation in a discourse. This means that she may resort to perspectivization, i.e., shift this centre of orientation onto another person (cf. Sanders / Spooren 1997: 86–95).

Clearly, perspectivization has a direct bearing on the interpretation of an utterance (part) as ironic, since a crucial prerequisite to the recognition of irony is the realization that the speaker has withdrawn responsibility for what she is saying, i.e., she no longer acts as the subject of consciousness. Even if this is not explicitly marked, ironic utterances typically feature someone (or some other group, possibly just another voice) other than the speaker as the subject of consciousness. In other words, an essential component of irony is the recognition of a distance between two evaluative positions, one assumed by the speaker and the other by the person or voice acting as the subject of consciousness (cf. Livnat 2004: 58, Chatman 1978: 228–236). This allows the speaker to imply that her own evaluative vantage point is more adequate by questioning the appropriateness of the inherent vantage point of a representation. Hence, irony has an important relativizing function: things can be evaluated from multiple viewpoints but certain viewpoints are less adequate in a given discourse than others (cf. Haiman 1998: 18–27). A significant corollary is that the adequateness of context-dependent vantage points may be evaluated along a scale, and the distance between them is a matter of degree.

(5) In the 1950's, uncle Cohn is asked at a conference of the communist party:
– Comrade Cohn, don't you have an opinion of your own?
– Of course I do, but I don't agree with it.

The joke in (5) aptly illustrates the idea that irony and perspective are interrelated: there may be multiple (and mutually exclusive) vantage points from which a situation can be evaluated and occasionally, they may even be linked to one and the same subject. Naturally, in the context of this joke, self-irony translates into the critique of an era.

A crucial point regarding irony is that it is not directly related to particular linguistic constructions; rather, its interpretation hinges on the context. To understand irony, one needs to be well-informed about the situation, the discourse topic, etc., otherwise no (or at best a very limited) ironic interpretation is available. However, this does not mean that there would be a shortage of optional linguistic devices that may help the listener recognize the perspectivization inherent in irony, hence reducing the risk of misunderstanding.

These devices can in fact be regarded as contextualization cues, as they only aid in the recognition of irony by directing attention to the need for drawing on contextual information. These cues can come from various domains of the linguistic system. In spoken language, the most frequent marker of ironic attitude is a particular intonation pattern, which is distinguishable from the prosody of non-ironic utterances. Significant prosodic cues include floating (or rising) intonation, a lower pitch, the exaggerated use of certain prosodic features (singsong, heavy accents, the lengthening of syllables etc.) and nasalization, accompanied by pauses or laughter.

Furthermore, spoken language also allows the use of paralinguistic devices such as mimics (winking, smiling sarcastically) and gestures (poking, tapping on the shoulder). In the written register, irony may be signalled by typographical conventions including the use of italics, quotation marks, or occasionally exclamation marks. Certain expressions or fixed phrases can also be deployed to a similar effect (*as they say*, *as we all know*). As a general remark, it can be added that the linguistic markers of evidentiality and quoting (also a form of perspectivization) often contribute to the recognition of irony.

(6) Come in cramozin garmented;
For to Love martyr did he die.
Thereof he swore on his manlihead,
Whenas he felt his end drawn nigh.

(From François Villon's *Ballad, by way of ending*. Translation by John Payne.)

As (6) shows, the recognition of irony in an utterance may be helped by the linguistic context (or "co-text"), as the presence of incompatible elements in the same sentence (*martyr* vs. *manlihead*) makes an ironic interpretation highly probable. This is further accentuated by the phrase *he felt*, explicitly marking perspectivization.

## 2.2. Irony as covert metapragmatic reflection

It follows from the above that irony represents one way in which discourse participants can express a reflective attitude to the linguistic choices they or others are making. It serves to direct attention at the linguistic activity itself, and profile (a high level of) metapragmatic reflection (cf. Verschueren 1999: 187–198). In effect, irony involves the overwriting of a linguistic representation (utterance or utterance part) by a meta-representation that questions the adequacy of its evaluative vantage point (cf. Curcó 2000, Livnat 2004).

(7) I know your heart is bleeding for me
and the shore is awash with your tears
when, with a sportsman's elegance,
Fate sends a bullet into me.

In (7) above, which is the translation of an excerpt from a Hungarian song's lyrics, the passages *your heart is bleeding for me* and *the shore is awash with your tears* reflect the speaker's ironic attitude to the representations they express, suggesting that they are construed inadequately. Hence, irony may be viewed as a special kind of implicit meaning construal suggesting a high level or metapragmatic reflection, which is not bound to a particular grammatical construction.

Prototypically, irony implies a critical attitude to the evaluative vantage point of a representation; however, it may also imply praise. One reason for the predominance of negative irony may be that the representation highlighting an ironic attitude expresses social norms violated by the situation at hand. In such cases, irony

has a moral aspect to it: not only does it imply that the person or community fails to comply with a given norm, but also that it should take steps to the contrary. In other instances, the irony suggests criticism because of its exaggerating character.

When it is applied in a given interaction, irony may serve a wide range of communicative demands or social expectations (cf. Attardo 2000a). Firstly, it may reinforce the sense of belonging to a group, especially when irony is directed at a third person or party. Here, the sense that the speaker and the addressee belong together comes at the expense of the outsider or group of outsiders. However, discourses characterized by self-irony or irony directed at the addressee may also reflect a feeling of "talking the same language". Secondly, irony may indicate the superiority of the speaker, i.e., the fact that he is in control of the situation, is capable of viewing it from outside or from above; furthermore, that he can play with language by saying one thing and meaning another. Thirdly, irony may express politeness as it allows the speaker to avoid direct confrontation. Owing to its indirect or vague character, negative irony may blunt criticism, while positive irony may help the speaker avoid any inconvenience that open praise might bring in its wake (cf. Leech 1983: 142–151).

Irony may satisfy these communicative demands because in its own covert way it exploits a fundamental aspect of linguistic cognition and communication: the extraordinary capacity of humans to reflect on their own linguistic activity, on the utterances they or others are making, and on the conscious processes behind them.

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